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'MULTICULTURAL' LONDON

Professor Pat Thane FBA reports on a British Academy Forum held on 15 June 2010.

London is an exceptionally diverse city in terms of the cultural and linguistic origins of its residents. About 300 languages are said to be spoken within its boundaries. It has long been home to migrants from many countries, though their numbers and the diversity of their origins has grown in recent decades. Tensions associated with migration in other British towns and cities and other countries regularly make headlines, yet London seems exceptional both in the extent of cultural diversity and the relatively peaceable way in which such rapid change has come about. The purpose of the British Academy Forum held in June 2010 was to discuss the past and present of London's cultural mix, and to ask how best to interpret it and whether any generalisable messages for policy-makers can be proposed which could contribute to improving social harmony and cohesion nationwide. The Forum was chaired by Wesley Kerr, whose mother came from Jamaica in 1958 in response to appeals for nurses to work in the NHS. He became a TV presenter and now chairs London Heritage.

Multiculturalism

Lord Bhikhu Parekh FBA opened the Forum by discussing whether the term 'multiculturalism' defines a desirable goal for a culturally diverse society, such as London. It has been much criticised by those who believe that it assumes cultural relativism, giving equal value to all aspects of all cultures, endangering aspirations to a national common culture and encouraging excessive awareness of cultural difference and social division rather than social cohesion.

Lord Parekh described multiculturalism as a post Second World War concept. Earlier waves of migrants came in smaller numbers, often fleeing from persecution, were expected largely to assimilate to the dominant culture and readily did so, from gratitude at finding refuge. Post-war migrants from former colonies came voluntarily, largely for economic reasons, encouraged by Britain which needed their labour. They came in larger numbers than their predecessors and often had greater confidence and desire to retain their accustomed cultural practices.

In Lord Parekh's view, multiculturalism means that British society can accommodate and respect cultural differences, though not uncritically, if it provides opportunities for people to interact, formally and informally – hopefully evolving a shared culture which respects differences while building common bonds, enabling each cultural group to learn from others, enhancing awareness of the strengths and limitations of each other, and in the process redefining the national identity. In the Forum discussion, some criticised this as utopian, underestimating the discrimination, inequalities and tensions that are the reality of relations both between and within different cultural groups in London. It was also pointed out that economic crisis, limited

resources, unemployment and housing problems created tensions which could undermine ideal solutions.

Professor David Feldman (Birkbeck) agreed that London, indeed the whole of the UK, has coped with cultural diversity for at least 300 years. His interpretation of the process was different however from Lord Parekh's: that Britain absorbed immigrant cultures in the same way that Wales, Scotland and Ireland were integrated into the multinational United Kingdom, and the colonies into the British Empire: preserving cultural distinctiveness insofar as it did not challenge English dominance. The British government achieved this through supporting dominant leaders and hierarchies and orthodox religions – e.g., by supporting faith schools from the 19th century – in minority cultures, in effect supporting their more conservative characteristics. It was suggested in the discussion that this continues to be so – e.g., only male voices from certain communities were influential, reinforcing patriarchal tendencies which marginalised women. Who speaks for each 'community' is important.

Immigration history

Professor Jerry White (Birkbeck) also pointed out that London has a long but not wholly benign history of immigration. Traditionally it did not welcome cultural difference and was suspicious of strangers. This makes the change since 1945 all the more striking. The numbers and diversity of overseas immigrants have grown at unprecedented speed. In 1951, only 1 in 20 Londoners was born outside the UK, the largest single group being Poles; by 1971, 15 per cent were foreign-born; by 1991, London consisted of 12 per cent of the British population but 45 per cent of its Black and Minority Ethnic population. Incomers came from an increasing range of countries for a growing diversity of reasons: economic migrants from former colonies and recently from the EU, refugees from persecution such as the Ugandan Asians in the 1960s, and many others more recently, refugees from war-zones. These changes occurred with no sustained hostility or violence, and without the ghettoisation characteristic of some other towns and cities in the UK and other countries.

Brick Lane

Dr Claire Alexander (LSE) provided a case-study of this process, discussing Brick Lane as epitomising 'multicultural London in its many, and not always positive, faces'. The area has been home to successive waves of immigrants, many of whom later moved on to other parts of London and elsewhere: Huguenots, Jews from Eastern Europe, both escaping persecution, Irish dock-workers, sailors from everywhere, more recently Bangladeshis who are mainly economic migrants. It has also seen conflict, notably anti-semitic riots of the 1930s, struggles against racists in the 1970s, and the resistance to both. It has always been poor, and two-thirds of Bangladeshi families in Britain live below the poverty line. But they do not live in an inward-looking cultural ghetto. The existing community has a strong sense of



Figure 1.
Brick Lane.
Photo:
Cate Gillon/
Getty Images.

the history of the area and their connection with it, and also of their connection with Bangladesh. They preserve distinctive characteristics of their culture, but this cultural identity is not uncontested and there are divisions around gender, age, class and politics. They engage with wider cultures, most notably through the restaurant trade whose growth and existence has itself changed British culture – chicken tikka masala now being a favourite national dish, invented in Britain from Indian origins and now exported to South Asia. ‘Indian’ restaurants also make a substantial contribution to the UK economy.

Absence of ghettos

In the discussion following, Professor Tony Travers (London School of Economics, Greater London Group) reinforced White’s point about the absence of ghettoisation as a key to the relatively peaceful coexistence of multiple cultural groups in London. London’s size and mobile, fragmented character, combined with the random way that different groups of different sizes had migrated, meant that there were no big concentrations of migrants or obviously ethnically based politics or voting. This was supported later by the talk by Professor Ron Johnston FBA (University of Bristol) which clearly mapped the geographical dispersion of ethnic groups in London (Figure 2). Though there are some strong concentrations, they are nowhere a majority. Even in East London, 63 per cent of Bangladeshis live in areas where whites are a majority. Johnston suggested that perhaps the only ghettos in London are the overwhelmingly white outer suburbs, which have changed much less than inner London. Travers, however, observed that suburbs such as Harrow and Redbridge are changing too as people move out from the inner city, as previous generations of migrants did. Rob

Berkeley of the Runnymede Trust pointed out that the Greater London Authority predicts that by 2015 five of the seven boroughs which will be ‘majority minority’ are Harrow, Redbridge, Croydon, Ealing and Hounslow in outer London, as well as Brent and Newham which already are. Tower Hamlets and Lambeth are not predicted to be ‘majority minority’, reinforcing the perception of the fluidity and lack of ghettoisation of the London population. It also suggested a degree of upward mobility among at least some minority groups

The Barking and Dagenham experience

David Woods, Acting CEO of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, gave a case-study of how one, less privileged, outer London borough has coped with change. In 1980, the area was overwhelmingly white and working class, two-thirds of housing was council owned, and most workers were employed at the Ford car factory. During the 1980s, the sale of council houses and the running down of Fords changed the area. Unemployed residents moved away in search of work. Former council houses were bought by immigrants, of varied ethnic origin, from inner London because they were among the cheapest in London; and by buy-to-let landlords, including inner London boroughs, who dumped their problematic tenants on Barking and Dagenham. In 1991, only 7 per cent of residents were non-UK born; in 2001, 15 per cent. The non-UK born population is now estimated at 40 per cent. The area has changed radically, with greater turnover and less commitment of residents to the community and to care of the environment. Tensions built up around housing and unemployment in particular, fanned by the British National Party which gained seats on the local council.

In the past few years the council, together with the local police, has worked hard to map the characteristics of the population, then to communicate individually with residents to establish their concerns and discern how to respond. In particular, the clearing and improving of the front gardens of transient residents and the environment generally, and investing in skills training and apprenticeships (especially for local white working class boys, who are the worst performers in school), have, Woods argued, helped to reduce tensions and build a more cohesive community. Not least it probably ensured the total defeat of the BNP in the local elections in May 2010. This suggested that initiatives of this kind by local government – of which too little is known – may deserve much of the credit for the relatively calm history of cultural change in London, but that this is too little recognised or supported by central government. Woods commented that central government spent 'huge sums in response to how things are, but not very much on changing the way things are' – e.g., a very large amount is spent in Barking and Dagenham as a consequence of domestic violence, but very little on preventing it. This was one of the strongest messages of the Forum for government policy.

Identity

Rob Berkeley (Director, Runnymede Trust) then took up the issue of how identity is constructed in a city as diverse as London. He described a recent discussion at a sixth-form college in an ethnically diverse part of North London about the impact of race and racism on students' lives. He asked whether they felt they were British. One or two did so. None thought they were English. All agreed that they were Londoners. To him this suggested the identification of these students and others with the great variety of communities in London: Vietnamese, Bolivians, Brazilians, Francophone Africans and many more, as well as migrants from the Commonwealth and the EU. But there is enormous diversity within and between cultural groups: there are Poles who came during and after World War II and stayed, and very recent, sometimes transient, migrants. Among Black Africans, Nigerians are more likely to have degrees than the white population of UK, Somalis are less likely to have finished secondary school. There are divisions also around age, gender, sexuality, religion and levels of income and wealth, which may be more important for individuals than ethnicity in building cultural

identity. And there are real inequalities and discrimination, e.g., 'the police will stop and search black people eight times more in proportion than white people'. There is also the important issue of the number of people who live in London who do not have full citizenship rights. It is important to be aware of the great diversity of people in London rather than trying 'to suggest that everyone should assimilate into a very narrow space ... people don't just identify with small spaces' – as his opening example suggested, they might, rather, identify with the large space of 'London'.

A world city

In conclusion, Berkeley pinpointed the main issue emerging from the Forum: 'We won the Olympics on the back of the notion that we were the world in one city. I think it is becoming more and more true. We are creating the world in one city and all the inequalities of the world in one city. I want to start in a hopeful place about those interactions and things that we could create differently in London, to challenge the rest of the world about some of the ethnic conflict that still occurs. We are not yet capitalising on that. I worry that London could be a complete real beacon for the rest of the world in terms of thinking about what it really does mean to be a world city, but it is missing an opportunity.'

The Forum opened up important aspects of the issue of how a 'world city' might be made to work, how this opportunity can be taken forward; what helps and what hinders co-existence across cultures. It produced no clear answers but it began to frame the questions as central to our understanding of modern cities and to our aspirations to build a future together, despite our diverse pasts.

Pat Thane is Leverhulme Professor of Contemporary British History, at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, and a Fellow of the British Academy.

The British Academy Forum 'Multicultural London: History and policy' was organised in association with History & Policy.

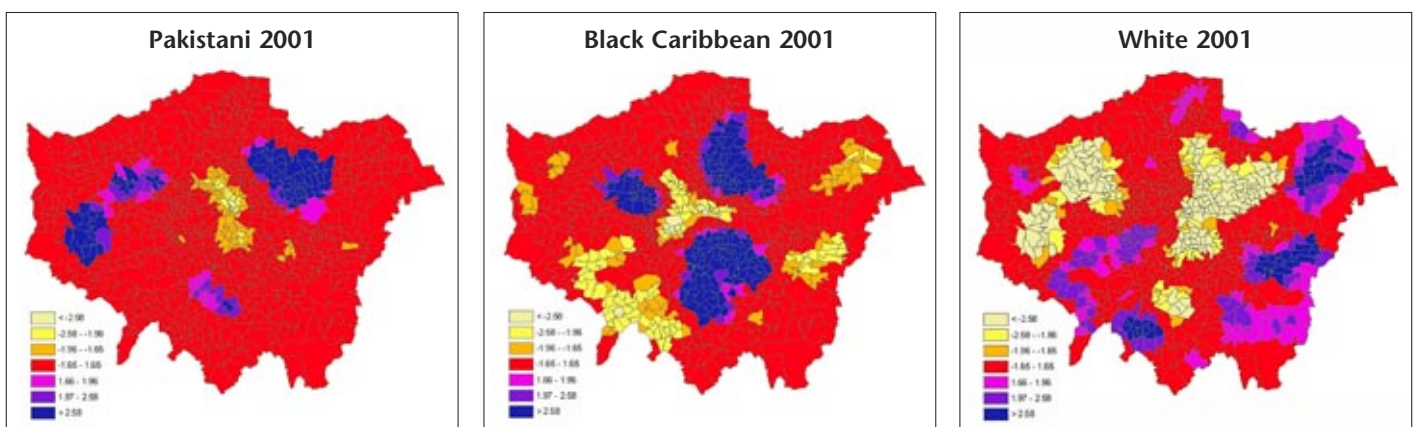


Figure 2. Ethnic groups in Greater London, as defined by the 2001 census. Blue represents areas where each group is found in much greater percentages than across the city as a whole; yellow represents areas where they are absent in relative terms. Maps: Michael Poulsen and Ron Johnston.